

# Sound and Theatre

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Sound perception plays an important role in the individuation process, both in the womb and as the sense most directly linked to the speech act. The presence of mechanized noise in urban environments has been criticized both by ecological modernists and adherents of information theory's emphasis on clear signals and the elimination of noise. This essay rejects these forms of utopianism, as they do not address the quotidian reality of the individual dealing with human resource enforced employee efficiency. Instead a form of individuation enacted by the speech act in a group setting is embraced as an aesthetic form enhanced by the technological sublime, where the presence of noise is a catalyst for remapping quotidian behaviour.

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## Introduction

The novels of JG Ballard regularly involve a central character who finds an exit from the banalities of the quotidian in post-WWII Britain. These characters' normal professional activities are disturbed by various natural and sociological events that bring them into a new realm of action and have an aesthetic impact on their overall prerogatives. Examples of this narrative structure abound in Ballard's novels, it is the central trope of his oeuvre<sup>1</sup>. Once the character has exited from the quotidian, they are drawn to unusual parts of urban imagination, erotically entranced by the need to participate in architecture with the different eyes offered to them by the transaction of habits.

A reading of the narrative structure of this important late 20<sup>th</sup> century oeuvre might be that the ability to recognize and participate in spatiotemporal perception is largely defined by the professionalized necessity of quotidian behavior. Those phenomena lying outside clear communication highways of the human resource managed employee are difficult to recognize, built into the tacit environment. Through an aesthetic

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of these novels include JG. Ballard, *Crash*, Jonathan Cope, London 1973; Id., *Super-Cannes*, Picador, London 2000; Id., *Millenium People*, Flamingo, London 2003.

event, Ballard's characters exit from the professionalized perceptions they have acquired. As a consequence they are able to recognize spaces normally lying outside the normative vault of behavior management. They are suddenly attracted by parking lots, hangars, warehouses, highway meridians, high rises, and business parks for their erotically charged qualities. Phenomenologically the characters enter a different realm from what came before, and opportunities and desires emerge which they never imagined existing beforehand. New pathways are invented due to this break with the static algorithms of the quotidian. This is the form of aesthetics this essay will be geared towards, focusing on the importance of sound as a producer in this process, both in its form as music and perhaps more importantly in the form of the speech act in the context of participation in a community.

To change an individual's awareness of phenomena in new sensorial directions outside the normalized domain, a disruption must occur, and for the purposes of this essay, this disruption will be considered a form of aesthetic event, which occurs on an individual basis in the context of a group. In Claude E. Shannon's classical 1948 formulation of information theory a clear communication signal is without noise, and noise is seen as disruptive, a negative force related to entropy. Adopting information theory, behavior offering a clear signal has been encouraged and enforced by institutional and corporate human resource departments to obtain the most efficient results from employees and employers alike. Noise interrupts the signal, a disruptive spontaneity lying outside the information system offered by the signal, present in aberrant behavior and unexpected spatial geometries. The aesthetic event of reorienting the sensorial realm thus might be associated with noise. Through an encounter with noise in special social contexts, the expectations of an individual's awareness of space and time might be remapped, an exit from normative systems, and an entrance into other forms of narrative or value.

The spectator's sensorial experience of music is of primary concern, and as will be shown, the aesthetic to be offered in this paper considers music as

a catalyst for new forms of social relations, where virtuosity<sup>2</sup> in spectator behavior supplants the art object as the key to the real aesthetic event, that being the individual whose sensorial realm has been opened to previously unknown intensities. As will be seen in the following section, the drive towards the learnt quantification of reality helps describe the development and flourishing of the employee mentality that has led to the contemporary situation of biopower-led behavior management, and how music practice might participate in leading towards other forms of perception. R. Murray Schafer's sound ecology project will be presented for its pastoral idealism, and as a springboard for this essay's embrace of the technological sublime in sound production as a means of organizing spectator group dynamics and leading towards a potential remapping of the anthropological value of sensorial perception in individual participants.

### **Measurement in History: Occidental Quantification and the Individual**

European civilization learnt to dominate through the ability to quantify the sensorial realm. This is the thesis of Alfred J. Crosby's *The Measure of Reality*, a work striking in its description of the Occidental drive to quantify, categorize and harness nature and social phenomena. Crosby considers the measurement of space and time, but also devotes a chapter to music, describing how the invention of musical notation changed the way it was played and remembered. It is no coincidence that the cartographical mapping of newly colonized continents took place at the same time as the development of written musical notation. This arrived with the invention of the book in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, but also coincided with an increased colonial drive by European powers. There is violence in the quantified and descriptive anatomization of the world, a dissected recording of reality, which solidifies into knowledge and renders older forms of remembering antiquated. The measurement of reality also made surveillance of social space and time more sophisticated. Power structures were increasingly able

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<sup>2</sup> A term used by Paolo Virno to describe speech acts which produce new forms of social relations. In *Grammaire de la Multitude*. Editions de L'éclat. Montreal 2001.

to manage their subjects, leading to a court mentality of politicized behavior. Because social norms became increasingly visible and enforced, the successful modern subject has learnt to hide away his or her potentially dangerous opinions in folds of the personality, the Baroque secret. The individual who learns it is better to mask thought, and thereby live their life within the visible grasp of power structures, has a much better chance of success within the system of monetized capital. This courtier mentality emerged from the Italian Renaissance and is an original form of the modern cynicism presented and criticized by Peter Sloterdijk in *Critique of Cynical Reason*. According to Sloterdijk's analysis, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century this form of modern cynicism expanded to include all individuals functioning in a European style nation-state.

Where an ego appears in the modern economic world, there it must appear as politician, strategist, deceiver, calculator, and diplomat. For every contemporary, political tactics go to the head; at the same time, this "risky business" of tactics descends to the last shopkeeper. [...] Where the ego does not want to become only a cog in an alienated oversized machine, it must stretch itself in the other direction and learn the art that earlier was the sole province of the great figures of politics. It must go through years of apprenticeship in political cynicism<sup>3</sup>.

Political cynicism is thus directly related to the management of the sensorial realm towards money-making ends. This is reiterated in Pierre Bourdieu's description of the precedent of the one-sided Occidental value system, where

la découverte du travail suppose la constitution du sol commun de la production, c'est-à-dire le désenchantement d'un monde naturel désormais réduit à sa seule dimension économique; cessant d'être le tribut payé à un ordre nécessaire, l'activité peut s'orienter vers une fin exclusivement économique, celle-la même que la monnaie, désormais mesure de toutes choses, désigne en toute clarté<sup>4</sup>.

For the purposes of this essay, the aesthetic event is a sensorial reorientation within the economically driven individual, posing the question, how might the spatio-temporal reductionism of late capitalist

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<sup>3</sup> P. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, The University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1987, p. 438.

<sup>4</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 2000, p. 360.

perceptions be transcended, even if for a brief moment of remapping towards other anthropological forms? In the following sections the potential of sound production in this context will be considered. How would this work? R. Murray Schafer has offered a theory of sound ecology which at first seems compatible with a deeper sense of nature in the quotidian, but upon further analysis is revealed to be deeply unsatisfying.

### **Pastoral Modernism and Fetal Discerning**

Born in 1933, R. Murray Schafer is a Canadian artist, composer and writer. Schafer's concepts are symptomatic of a strain of modernism that opposes the industrialized world. In both his art and theoretical practice he has held a fierce ecological position against the mechanized industrial sounds of the urban environment. In the late 1960s, through his efforts to raise awareness about the rise of noise pollution, he developed concepts like the *soundscape*, *earcleaning* and *schizophonia*. As a pedagogical method the aim of *earcleaning* was to create an awareness of sound in the environment and the disruptive affect of mechanical noise on consciousness. This paper will consider his ideas as presented in *Soundscape: the Tuning of the World*<sup>5</sup>.

The implications of Schafer's project are ambitious for several reasons. The ability to hear the sounds making up an environment alters the directional pull of the senses that make up an internalized map of ideological imperatives. The repetitive banality of mechanical sounds establishes a map imbedded in individual behavior to the point where its presence is built into the soundscape and made tacit. There is an ideological rhetoric in sound that becomes difficult to hear because it is made up of assumed conventions. Schafer's *earcleaning* offers an attempt to become aware of those aural elements which have become tacit. This could be the sound of machines like dishwashers, cars, air conditioning, etc., but it also might be those ambient music experiences imbedded in the soundscape. The limits of aural awareness proposed in *Soundscape*, for example, are grand: the sound of the cosmos turning, if we were aware enough, would be audible.

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<sup>5</sup> R.M. Schafer, *Soundscape: the Tuning of the World*, Destiny Books, Rochester Vermont 1977.

There is evidently a reference to John Cage's well-known statement that silence does not exist, but also some sense there is an *aural unconscious*, a psychological element of sound perception which has subliminal effects on the individual in their ability to function.

A similar conception of sound is emphasized by Peter Sloterdijk in *Spheres I*<sup>6</sup>, but in a different sense, where the pre-natal child develops an ability to filter noise heard in the womb and thereby develops a defense mechanism against chosen sounds:

the fetal ear already develops the ability to find its bearings in its ever-present, invasive sonic environment actively through independent, lively listening and non-listening. As Tomatis untiringly emphasizes, the child's stay in the womb would be unbearable without the specific ability not to listen and to mute large areas of noise, as the mother's heartbeat and digestive sounds, heard in such close proximity, would be like the noise from a 24-hour building site or a lively barroom conversation. If the child did not learn to avert its ears at an early stage, it would be ravaged by permanent noise torture<sup>7</sup>.

The mother's body is compared to an urban environment, her organs building sites of the body's processes. The child is able to respond to these invasive sounds by shutting them out. Schafer's ecological position ignores this ability to process information and disregard what is unwanted. If we follow this train of thought, there seems to be a contradiction with Schafer's ecological framework, which ignores social reality and focuses on an impregnable ideal referring to a Romantic logic of an anachronistic past. To imagine the human ear is an open valve with no ability to choose between wanted and unwanted sounds seems simplistic, too focused on the physical characteristics of sound. Again Sloterdijk: "through prenatal auditions, the ear was equipped with a wealth of heavenly acoustic prejudices which, in its later work in the noisy pandemonium of reality, facilitate orientation and especially selection"<sup>8</sup>.

The aesthetic process of individuation through the presence of interpersonal (or pre-individual) musical practice is what I am attempting to describe and sound is shown here for its importance as a deeply political

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<sup>6</sup> P. Sloterdijk, *Spheres I*, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Ivi, pp. 501-502.

<sup>8</sup> Ivi, p. 508.

aspect of differentiation. We see the importance of pre-individual sound discerning in this description of a child's experience in the mother's womb: the primary theatre, the one from which all other social experience can be said to refer. The womb is a theatrical space if ever there was one, complete with the circular architecture of tonal reverberation that relates the outside world of daily life among the community to an inside position, or listening setting that creates a first opportunity for discernment, an entrance into both ethics and aesthetics. In Sloterdijk's reading of the fetal period the tonal sounds heard from outside the womb are integrated into the pre-nascent discerning capabilities of the fetus. How important is the first period of sound experience for the development of post-natal experience? According to Sloterdijk, who relies heavily on the results of French psychologist Alfred Tomatis in his analysis, the sound of the mother's voice in this period, complete with particular tonal reverberations created by the architecture of the womb, offers a primary point of social reference, without the potentially negative compromise of social feedback. The psychologist's clinical method in fact relies on recording the voice of a patient's mother, modifying it to fit the uterine tonality, and playing it back for the patient. Apparently, the clinical results are impressive, troubled patients experiencing profound cure. The return to the origins of sound experience, and especially the mother's voice, illustrates the importance of sound (and also particular tonality) for an individual. Personal and collective memory is contained within sound at a deeper level of experience than the visual, the process of interpersonal discernment begins with hearing.

### **Technology, Sound and the Aesthetics of Individuation**

A professional learns to measure his or her behavior with money making efficiency as the central goal, thereby elaborating a dominion over himself and others. Sloterdijk's labyrinthine criticism of cynicism considers this point: the separation of the working individual from the underlying voices of bodily dissent, memories of anthropological needs left unaddressed. This two-faced mentality is modern cynicism, already mentioned above, unavoidable in the working world of behavior management. Human



interaction contains never-ending rules of engagement, which can be deepened, transformed and disrupted. When the rules maintain efficiency oriented strategizing they belong to the professionalized quotidian. When the interaction can be deepened, lengthened, and unmeasured, the quotidian is dissolved, revealing it never really existed, offering the individual a moment of virtuosity, perhaps only possible in a dialogue that can be troubling for the group, risky for contemporary social cohesion. Specific types of theatre are setup for this type dis-unification, moments of carnival dwelling where an individual may be inhabited by multiple potentially dangerous voices. The salubrious contraction of voice: Gargantua containing entire cities in his teeth. Aesthetics must encourage this ulterior voice of virtuosity. Paolo Virno describes one form of this virtuosity as the speech act, the ultimate form of theatre. What would be the way to achieve its most effective form?

As previously mentioned in the introduction, in information theory a clear signal exists with the absence of noise. Noise is defined as information disrupting the clarity of a signal. But in a given cultural context, the clarity of a signal is always ideological, meaning the underlying logic of what a clear signal might contain depends on cultural variables. Consequently, noise might be defined as information not corresponding with the specific ideological framework of a given context. Noise could also be defined in our behavior management world as a signal not referring to behavioral efficiency. In a similar way, the representation of self in everyday life is governed by endless signs, some of which are clear and some of which disrupt what is expected by the framework of architecture and efficiency enforced role-playing behavior. In these role-playing procedures ritual remains ever present, including various forms of politeness and etiquette. But if cynical role-playing increasingly requires the absence of inefficient ritual, then noise and aberrant behavior are aligned. In *The Representation of Self in Everyday life*<sup>9</sup>, Erving Goffman describes the theatrical nature of personality in various professional and traditional situations. There is a staged mentality where individuals quickly change their roles when

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<sup>9</sup> E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Anchor Books, New York 1959.



transitioning between “onstage” and “backstage” in their working roles<sup>10</sup>. What allows for the clarity of these roles is the organization of architectural spaces in which they are played. The more controlled the role-playing procedures, the less opportunity for virtuosity in speech.

To return briefly to Schafer, that the process of *earcleaning* could avoid personal or culturally imbedded biases seems unreliable as a means to affect an individual’s ability to produce virtuosity in speech. The process would require some ideological logic, and a pure pre-industrial ecology does not meet any practical ends, and in fact might be linked with Luddite paranoia. The aspect of personality is the essential element missing from Schafer’s analysis of sound. The sounds an individual hears and needs to hear- to experience an aesthetic event- are based on personally imbedded histories and values. Another criticism of Schafer might be that he does not deal with urban reality and prefers to retreat into a pastoral hideaway that only exists as a bourgeois dream of utopia. Urban machine and garbage sound has no place in the eventual paradigm *Soundscape* would like to establish. This type of polemic leads to frustration, a deep dissatisfaction with the mediocre reality of the industrial and digital urban environment. Joanna Demers writes about Schafer’s position that the “*Soundscape* envisioned and even hoped for a technological disaster that would return society to a quieter, preindustrial landscape. For Schafer, technology can potentially reveal the subtleties of natural soundscapes but instead too often produces noise”<sup>11</sup>.

Schafer’s rejection of machine made sounds is largely this: a denial of the needs of an individual dealing with a quotidian framed by a mechanized mentality of labor. Instead, he rejects the possibility outright. Equally critical of this pastoral anti-industrial aesthetic is Gilbert Simondon:

L’opposition dressée entre la culture et la technique, entre l’homme et la machine, est fausse et sans fondement ; elle ne recouvre qu’ignorance ou ressentiment. Elle masque derrière un facile humanisme une réalité riche en

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<sup>10</sup> A classic example being a restaurant waiter moving between the kitchen and the serving floor.

<sup>11</sup> J. Demers, Joanna, *Listening through the Noise*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010, p. 77.

efforts humains et en forces naturelles, et qui constitue le monde des objets techniques, médiateurs entre la nature et l'homme<sup>12</sup>.

The false opposition between technology on the one hand, and nature and humans on the other, ignores the place of technology in our sensorial experience of the world. To understand the importance of Simondon's criticism it is useful to refer to the *technological sublime*, an aesthetic concept developed by Leo Marx in *The Machine in the Garden*<sup>13</sup>, a work describing the other side of pastoral utopianism, a historical moment when the industrial machine appears in the American and European landscapes. Marx describes the machine as a strange bedfellow in the pastoral environment and offers many literary examples showing a reaction deeply imbedded in the American character. As part of his analysis, he describes the technological sublime as an ecstatic effect of the combination between nature and the machine. Accepting the technological sublime for its ability to produce ecstatic states, machine sounds can be compatible with ritualized group dynamics and the results of this combination can lead to a deep ecology of interpersonal aesthetics, offering a de-robing of the personality, the achievement of a state in which other voices might surface, entangled in a community of periphery virtuosity. This type of unraveling can happen in a situation where sound encourages a community of voices to elaborate a process of individuation. Discussing Simondon's theory of individuation, Bernard Stiegler writes:

un individu ne se forme que dans le processus d'une individuation toujours déjà à la fois psychique et collective. Je ne peux m'individuer que dans un groupe, qu'en participant à un groupe. Mon individuation ne se constitue effectivement et ne se performe, en quelque sorte, que dans la mesure où elle contribue et participe à l'individuation d'un nous, c'est à dire d'un collectif qui m'englobe et avec lequel je partage ce que Simondon appelle un fonds preindividuel<sup>14</sup>.

To understand the anthropological importance of this function, the theatrical nature of village life would have to be considered, the way mythological voices emerge in day to day goings on among individuals, as

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<sup>12</sup> G. Simondon, *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*, Montaigne, Paris 1989, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> L. MARX, *The Machine in the Garden*, Oxford University Press, New York 2000.

<sup>14</sup> B. Stiegler, *Performance et singularité*, in *Performance: une nouvelle idéologie*, La Découverte, Paris 2004. p. 321.

seen for example, in Jean Roaches' films, where villagers become the incarnation of mythological characters at given points in their individual and collective biographical development, fulfilling needs presented by the community and offering behavior of dissent when necessary. This form of theatricality has a function for the cohesive integrity of the group, for the individual, at certain times of his or her life, needs to unleash voices which do not fit with the day to day community. This is a form of virtuosity in sound. Another example, very well documented and explored by Ernesto De Martino<sup>15</sup>, is Tarantella possession in Southern Italy, where individuals, usually women, are symbolically or actually bitten by tarantulas during harvest and are thereby put into trances which last several days, eventually to be soothed by a traditional form of music, Tarantella. These public displays of otherness serve a function for the individual, and in De Martino's explanation, for women especially, because it offers a chance to leave quotidian dynamics, where their voice will not be heard within the patriarchal community.

Aesthetic-magical domination is manifest in all group dynamics, and the use of music can be a means for the experienced sound-maker in some ritual situations to influence the behavior of less experienced listeners and participants. This has been documented Gilbert Rouget's ethnological study of the place of music in ritual, *La Transe et la Musique*: "On voit que l'efficacité de la musique varie avec la qualité de l'adepte, plus ou moins vulnérable suivant son âge, son expérience et sa place dans la hiérarchie du culte."<sup>16</sup> In this context, the "culte" can be whatever group of listeners which has entered into a specific listening context. There is a clear power dynamic at play in the individuality of sound producers and participants:

Au demeurant, qu'il s'agisse d'un culte ou d'un autre, les officiants, qui ont par définition une longue pratique de la possession, maîtrisent beaucoup plus leurs conduits que les adeptes de fraîche date. Ils sont donc moins étroitement asservis à la musique, de sorte qu'ils peuvent ou bien lui résister<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> E. De Martino, *The Land of Remorse: A Study of Southern Italian Tarantism* (1961), Translated and annotated by Dorothy Louise Zinn, Free Association Books, London 2005.

<sup>16</sup> G. ROUGET, *La musique et la transe*, Gallimard, Paris 1980.

<sup>17</sup> Ivi, p. 154.

The art of sound production in this description is linked with demonstrations of power dynamics in a group. Contemporary sound production in an art or music context works no differently. Leo Marx's technological sublime is key here to understand the importance of technology in allowing for the dissipation of normalized or bureaucratic forms of behavior. To draw an audience into music might be associated with the denial of a clear signal of communication, a form of wilderness in sound. Noise, in this sense, can allow for a re-nourished sense of ritual beyond the algorithms of bureaucratized behavioral management. Re-nourishing, remapping, dialectic pedagogy, occurs through exposure to the unclear signal. A listener's exposure to noise disorients, disrupting the clear signal of everyday repetition. The potential for new habits to emerge increases through exposure to sounds extending beyond what is accustomed in our money driven conception of appropriate behavior.

## **Conclusion**

There is a machine in our garden and it has to be dealt with as an advantage because it will not dissipate or disappear. Old guard modernists can act as high priests dominating intellectual cadres through denial of the body's needs, final leftovers of Enlightenment rhetoric. The spaces where the pastoral modernist abodes are clear and properly presented as part of a package- a clear signal of information- whole and imagined in the ear of a beholder un-invested in opening the sensorial realm to aberrant gestures because daily fiscal transactions are not sponsored by this type of capital. Seekers of exit from quotidian are left in the remnants of art to smolder and dream of escape from the forced rhythms of efficiency towards those rhythms adhering to unhinged inner voices.

The silent and disturbing truth behind both efficient employee behavior and sentimental pastoralism is nature itself, the cruelty of which can be intolerable. Theatre has long had the function of exhibiting forbidden forms of social relations, the framed vacuum of experiment, an architectural function beyond the scope of architecture, and noise is a vital form of this process both in music and the speech act. To re-achieve ritual in every daily

situation, disrobing the banal mediocrity of efficiency driven behavior and reconsidering the limits of proportion in spatiotemporal group dynamics as part of the process of individuation, which is the true object of aesthetics. Even if only briefly, we may become unmeasured: beyond the care of quotidian, entering the realms of virtuosity in social relations through an acceptance and celebration of aural garbage in the soundscape as a form of sublime.